



**DEVOTIONS FOR LENT AND EASTER
2020**

by the clergy and friends of the
Vermilion River District
Illinois Great Rivers Conference
The United Methodist Church

Ash Wednesday, February 26

Hungry Space, Holy Space

Isaiah 58:6: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?"

Read Isaiah 58:1-14.

Every year somebody asks me, "What do Methodists give up for Lent?" I understand their confusion. Our Roman Catholic neighbors know exactly what they are giving up for Lent every year, and on which days. But while we Methodists talk about making "a Lenten fast," we don't have a prescribed list or schedule. Some Methodists give up particular foods, or drinks. Some try to break bad habits. Some make financial sacrifices and save up the unspent funds for a worthy cause.

One year I watched two confirmation students completely decimate a chocolate chip cookie, pulling all the chips into one pile, and cookie bits into another. Turns out, one had given up cookies for Lent; the other had given up chocolate. They figured out they could dissect their dessert and divide the spoils, allowing both to enjoy a treat without technically breaking their Lenten fast!

I can see the prophet known as "Second Isaiah," shaking his head and rolling his eyes. "You don't get it," he is saying to these students, to the Israelites of his time, and to the rest of us. "Fasting isn't about what you eat or don't eat. It's not about winning a piety contest by sacrificing more than your neighbor. Biblical fasting is about intentionally making space: empty space, hungry space, longing space, righteous space, holy space, for the Spirit of God to come in and fill you with God. Only God."

If we keep ourselves full and satisfied, content with what we provide for ourselves, by ourselves, keeping our focus on our own plenty, rather than other people's need, we have no real desire to make a fast. Fasting becomes just a "thing we do."

What would happen if we followed the teaching of the prophet, and gave up *injustice* for Lent? What if we gave up the privilege, power, popularity, and all the "prizes" that come with being first-world Christians – and traded them in for solidarity with the poor and oppressed? What if we entered into their poverty of life (as Christ entered into our poverty of spirit) in order to help him turn this world upside-down, to include the excluded, to lift up the downtrodden? What if we did what Isaiah said to do: "to share your bread

with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them...." (v. 7)?

Isaiah describes the righteous, holy space that could happen:

"If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." (vv. 9, 10)

Prayer: Help us, Spacious God, to give up the habits we don't need, in order to make room for the ones we do: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and in prison. Allow the emptiness of our Lenten Fast to make Holy Space for the fullness of Christ's Victory Feast. Amen.

Sara L. Isbell, Bloomington Wesley UMC

Thursday, February 27

You and I Are Grass

“A voice says, ‘Cry out!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.” Isaiah 40:6-7

During the season of Lent, we are invited to contemplate our mortality – “from dust you have come; to dust you shall return”. That is something that I have had a hard time really taking to heart, until last year that is!

Usually when we think of mortality (if we have grown up in more traditional theological contexts) we tend to think about eternal destinations. Where will we spend eternity? During Lent, therefore, those of that persuasion would tend to consider, “What in my life today would potentially get in the way of obtaining a better eternal zip code?” Repenting in sackcloth and ashes and all that good stuff.

Even though I didn’t really go in to it with a sense of my mortality, (“This will be a piece of cake.”) I have given my mortality some considerable thought after I woke up from being unconscious for nearly a month. What I have taken away from it is not so much a concern over my eternal zip code. My concern is rather about just how much I make out of each day. Am I going through the motions, or am I making the most of the opportunities that I have each day?

Yes, you and I are grass – here today and gone tomorrow. We have no idea regarding our life span. We have no control over our lifespan. However, we do have some control over the quality of our life. We have some say regarding the degree to which we make the most of this life.

During this season of Lent, I invite us all to give consideration to the fact that we are like grass. As such, we have the opportunity to focus on making life meaningful and purposeful each day before it slips away like the morning dew.

Prayer: Lord, I am grateful for the precious gift of life. I don’t know the number of my days, but inspire me to a new sense of passion for living. Help me discover life’s fulness in loving connection with You, my neighbors, and myself in real and transformative ways. Amen.

Jim Barnett, Superintendent, Vermilion River District

Friday, February 28

Fasting in the Wilderness

Matthew 4:2-4: After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

For much of my life, I have tried to make my own decisions. I don't know about you, but I like to be in control. I like to make a decision, make a plan, and then stick to it. However, my plans don't always work. Whether from a lack of planning, lack of personal investment in it, or simply because my plan doesn't match God's plan, my plans don't always work.

That can be really difficult to hear, can't it?

I have learned, however, that God's plan is much better than my plan. During the Lenten season, I can refocus on the plans God has for me, by a process of discernment, or intentionally listening to God's voice. It is easier to begin discerning during Lent because scriptures like Matthew 4 are in my face and unavoidable.

In this passage, Jesus is met with the Tempter. Jesus had been fasting. He had been in communion with God. The passage says that he was physically hungry, but the events that follow suggest that he was spiritually very full. He was able to combat the temptation that came his way; even that of making bread for himself to eat. He replies with, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

This is the heart of fasting. Fasting is not just abstaining from an item or a habit. It is replacing something in your life with the pursuit of God. Why? Because we need more than the physical things to help us to thrive. When I take a step back and begin fasting, it does wonders for my prayer life. This intentional pursuit of God through prayer is not just me speaking to God but taking time to hear from God in return. Food can fill our bellies but fasting can fill our souls.

Prayer: Fill my spirit, Lord, as you filled Jesus during his fast in the wilderness, so that I may follow your plan instead of my own. Amen.
Jon Wisdom, Ransom/Verona UMC's

Saturday, February 29

The One Thing

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Psalm 51:10-12 (NRSV)

I have had a particular habit since I was a child. When I am nervous or anxious I chew or pick at my fingernails. Many interventions have been applied to this issue over the years including (but not limited to): bitter tasting nail polish, parents offer to pay x amount of money if no nail biting for x amount of time, practice of meditation when nervous or anxious rather than biting the nails, and so on. But to date, nothing had worked. Until now. As a New Year determination (not resolution) I decided I would consider the change I wanted to make as a form of self-care. Having nails too short, or putting fingers to mouth too often is not healthy for me. I want to be healthy. So, I decided that in an effort to be a good steward of the body God has given me and to honor Him, I would *choose* not to chew my fingernails. I developed a plan in advance of what I would do both to care for my hands and to manage the temptation to return to this anxious habit. I'm happy to say: so far, so good!

We all know change is hard. Many of us strive and struggle to make changes for the good in our lives and wonder why we're not seeing results. I had tried all of the interventions traditional wisdom had to offer, but failed. When I finally surrendered the issue to God and focused on honoring Him with this change, giving up a habit, the process took on new meaning and found success.

As we enter the season of Lent and perhaps commit to giving things up in remembrance and observation of this time, we must remember why we're doing it. It's not simply to give up something for the sake of giving it up, but we give things up in order to focus on the *one thing*, which is Christ. His suffering. His death. And finally, Christ raised from the dead.

As we focus on this one thing we remember that it is in Christ alone that we are redeemed, restored and made new. The change we want to see in our lives will come when we submit our ways and our will to Him. So during this season of Lent, let us focus on that which we plan to willingly surrender to Christ. And May we always remember that it is only through Christ that true change comes.

Sarah Fenlon Falk, Certified Lay Servant, Manteno UMC

Sunday, March 1

A Clean Piece of Paper

“On the night he gave himself up for us he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples and said: ‘Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this remembrance of me.’

“When the supper was over, he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said: ‘Drink from this, all of you, this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’” (United Methodist Book of Worship)

It was the first Sunday in October, 1979, World Wide Communion Sunday, and I had preached on the meaning of Communion. About 1:00 I was headed to Taylorville to make a hospital call. My daughter Betsy, then in kindergarten, was keeping me company. We were on the Taylorville blacktop when she looked at me and said, “I think I get it.” “Get what?” I asked. “This communion thing. It is like at school when we are practicing our letters. We write and erase, over and over again, until our paper is all smudged. Then Mrs. Marley comes over and picks up that piece of paper and gives us a clean one. Communion is giving us a clean piece of paper, right Dad?”

Right, and that my friends, is what God through Jesus Christ is offering to us each time we take Communion.

When was the last time you had a clean piece of paper?

Brent K. Phillips, Retired

Monday, March 2

Swimming in God's Abundance

Read John 6:1-15

A Journal Entry:

I am folded back into my space in front of the living room window as crows squawk, heater hums and my body adjusts following a trans-Atlantic journey. I just read the story of Elijah's resting after his fearful flight from Jezebel and then eating the food provided while he slept, and it touches my need today. This is not high-energy time, and the creation of great spiritual goals to achieve would not be a gentle response to where I am.

Instead I accept the tiredness, vulnerability, and need to be ministered to, and wait to eat from the divine fare that will be provided. And now I turn to the second scripture reading appointed today in *The Book of Common Prayer* lectionary and find it is the feeding of the 5,000 as recorded by John. Out of little, Christ creates abundance and all are fed, whether or not they are worthy, understanding, grateful.

This is grace. I am swimming in the ocean of God's abundance and know that today I will be fed with all that I need.

Prayer: Holy One, your welcome and gentle acceptance overwhelms me. I come gratefully to your table and pray for grace to be as Christ to others. May my words and my actions, my smile and my touch, show hospitality to all who come my way today. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Canham, [Heart Whispers: Benedictine Wisdom for Today](#),
©1999, Nashville: Upper Room Books.

Tuesday, March 3

Listening for God

Read Proverbs 2: 1-6

I was looking through a Christian book and merchandise catalog, which offered study Bibles, story Bibles, and concordances. Some Bibles were KJV, NKJV, NIT, or ESV, and some were translations that are rarely used in this day and age. There were self-help books and CDs to help a person become a more faithful follower of Jesus. There were books to help your marriage, books on how to be happier, books for women, and books for men. There were books and Bibles for everyone from 5 to 95. There were even books on the books of the Bible.

We can spend a lot of time and money on reading and learning what man has to say about God. Maybe we should consider spending more time seeking out what God has to say about God.

I love nature, where I can hear the whispers of God as I sit along a small creek, or underneath a giant oak. The places God has made for us to listen to Him in the great outdoors are immeasurable and waiting for us.

This Lenten season, let's try to make a concerted effort to stop, put down our literature, turn off our CDs and DVDs, and listen to what God has to say.

Let's try and spend forty days listening to God - not talking but listening. Really listen to your Father, your creator, and your God. What has He been wanting to tell you?

Prayer: Loving Creator, I am listening. What do You want to tell me? Amen.

John Lyons, Trinity UM Parish: Cabery, Cullom, Kempton UMC's

Wednesday, March 4

God's Generous Gift

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." – 1 Corinthians 1:18, NIV

Often, when someone brings us an unexpected gift, our first response is, "For me?" We are surprised and elated at the same time. Perhaps our response is this: "Oh, you shouldn't have." The giver answers: "But I wanted to. I love you." The giver doesn't calculate the cost. The giver knows that we are unworthy, but chooses to share their gift, nonetheless. A gift of love; of unmerited favor.

It feels good to be loved. Through the cross, God tells us how much God loves us! God has nailed our sins to the cross and awaits our response to God's generous gift!

The hymn-writer reminds us that our culture doesn't always grasp the meaning of the cross: "*O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world, has a wondrous attraction for me.*" (The Old Rugged Cross). Paul suggests that the message of the cross is "foolishness" to the non-believer. But, as believers in Christ, "to us who are being saved," the cross "IS the power of God." Power to face whatever life brings our way.

When I see a cross, I'm reminded of this simple story I read a long time ago. The story is about Kathy, a delightfully happy woman who had worked in a hospital kitchen. But her work came to an abrupt end when she developed terminal cancer. During a visit to the hospital, her pastor found Kathy in great pain. Her pastor, glancing at her antiseptic surroundings, pondered what could be done to help Kathy in what appeared to be the last days of her life. He asked if she'd like to have a cross in her room.

With most of her strength gone, Kathy nodded in the affirmative. Can you visualize her pastor carrying the large, silver cross from the communion table in the church sanctuary in his car, then walking down the corridor of the hospital receiving strange glances from the nurses and hospital staff as he approached Kathy's room?

As he entered, he knocked softly and said, "See what I have?" She looked up, tears filling her eyes and said, "For me?"

The simple question, “for me?” evokes in me a sense of profound gratitude as I think of the extent to which Jesus went to show me God’s love.

Beloved, when you see a cross, think of what God has done – just for you!

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the gift of your Son on the cross, for me, and for all. Amen.

Mike Ebersohl, Dwight UMC

Thursday, March 5

Lunatic Or Devil

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-20

“For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, or angels or spirits...”
Acts 23:8 (NLT)

C.S. Lewis stated in one of his most famous writings, “Mere Christianity”, that if Christ never really rose from the dead he was either a lunatic or devil. But Jesus was neither. He was, is, and always will be the eternal Son of God, one with the Father; He holds the keys of death and Hades. And he has the power to grant eternal life to all who put their faith in him.

What if you were diagnosed with a terminal illness, and a miracle cure was offered to you, but you refused to take it, thinking it would never work? What if you declared the doctor a quack and even set out to have his medical license revoked? Then as you took your last dying breath you discovered that this cure would indeed have saved you, and many others suffering from the same illness? It would not be the doctor that was a lunatic or devil, it would be you. You were the fool for not believing something you deemed too good to be true. And you were the devil for trying to keep it from others who could have been saved by it.

Not only pastors, but all Christians, are called to share the Gospel with the lost. We must first believe in Jesus’ resurrection ourselves, and then testify to its truth, its saving power, and its ability to transform lives. We are to bring light to a world blinded by darkness, love to a world infected with hate, and peace to a world paralyzed with fear. If we do not, Jesus is not the lunatic or devil, we are.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – Because He lives, we have the hope of eternal life.

PRAYER FOCUS: Those who do not believe in Christ’s resurrection

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for Jesus’ resurrection, and for giving us life through Him. Amen.

Karen Fabian, Braceville and Mazon UMC’s and Evenglow Lodge

Friday, March 6

Psalm 4, NIV

¹Answer me when I call to you,
my righteous God.

Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

²How long will you people turn my glory into shame?
How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?

³Know that the LORD has set apart his faithful servant for himself;
the LORD hears when I call to him.

⁴Tremble and do not sin;
when you are on your beds,
search your hearts and be silent.

⁵Offer the sacrifices of the righteous
and trust in the LORD.

⁶Many, LORD, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?"
Let the light of your face shine on us.

⁷Fill my heart with joy
when their grain and new wine abound.

⁸In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, LORD,
make me dwell in safety.

Saturday, March 7

Words Worth Remembering

Read: Exodus 34:1-9, 27-28

"Funny, imaginative, magical . . . Rowling has woken up a whole generation to reading. In the 2020's thirty-somethings will know each other by smug references to Diagon Alley and Quiddich" --The Times
[From the back cover of a 1997 edition of Britain's publication of the first Harry Potter book, "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone."]

As I sit together with my sons, I realize the truth of this prediction. They and I (not a 30 something) freely share from the Harry Potter books, as well as Star Wars and the Ring Trilogy. We quote them as freely as people used to allow scriptures of grace and hope to flow freely in their conversations. One of the lectionary readings for Lent is the story of Moses writing the Ten Commandments. Another: Matthew 18:10-14, Jesus teaching that God seeks people out who are lost. These stories are certainly worthy of remembering.

Do you have scripture you hang onto? One of those I hang onto is from Matthew 22:36-40: Jesus is asked "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

And then "He replied, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.'"

These words along with the care and comfort of the 23rd Psalm provide comfort and guidance to me; they are worth repeating, worth remembering. Today I invite you to pray through those scriptures that give you life and comfort. Commit them to your heart. If ObiWan can quote Jesus to provide comfort and strength to Luke in a Star Wars movie, "Lo, I am with you always" (episode 4) Imagine what you can offer to those within your sphere of influence.

Prayer: Living Word, help me commit your Word to my heart, so I can offer your words to others. Amen.

Scott Henley, Asbury UMC

Sunday, March 8

Our Hope

Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. Revelation 1:7

What are you anticipating? Spending Easter with your kids? A Spring Break with the kids? The end of a medical treatment? A New Car? The birth of a child? We are expecting our first grandchild—a miracle God is creating!

Looking forward to something is vital for mental health, and that's why the Bible ends with the book of Revelation. Without Revelation, the Bible would have no ending.

Instead it would have ended with the book of Jude, which is a powerful book about striving for the faith. But it's not a book that explains God's future. It doesn't leave us with descriptions of the new heavens and new earth. It doesn't end with the city whose builder and maker is God.

In these days, the swift return of Christ surges our anticipation of the coming events – – and we're living in days when we need all the reassurance we can find! Peter said, "Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent..."(2 Peter 3:14).

We can't live in the past, nor become so weighed down with the present trials that we forget our future glory. Things are going to get exceptionally and magnificently better!

Jesus Christ is coming on the clouds at the trumpet sounding! It's gonna be a great Family reunion like never before!

Prayer: Lord, let me be filled with living hope for the great things you have in store for today and for the future. Amen.

Janeen Tronc Cornell UMC/United Church of Odell

Monday, March 9

All Is Gift

Read Philippians 2:5-11

God's word came and comes again and again as an invitation to embrace change, to stay alert, to wait for discernment, and then to receive the gifts of grace with open hands.

Often in his writings Paul draws a contrast between the first Adam, whose sinful grasping led to separation from God, and the second Adam, Christ, whose extended hands on the cross image the ultimate letting go. The hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 celebrates the total self-emptying of Christ and his choice of obedience to the Creator as he lets go of all claims to equality with God. The passage highlights two ways of living, two responses to a loving Creator. Paul says, "Choose the nongrasping way of Christ; let go; allow your hands to be open; have the mind of Christ." [Author's paraphrase.]

God, the gracious, attentive, expert mechanic of the soul, most deeply desires that we become whole, so we can celebrate the spaciousness of a world where all is gift.

Prayer: God of life, heal our unfaithfulness and open our eyes to see and our hands to receive the grace you wait to give. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Canham, *Heart Whispers*, Upper Room Books, 1999.

Tuesday, March 10

God Wants Us to Bloom

Read: Ephesians 2:1-10

The Book of Worship says, "*Lent* comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, which means 'spring'. The season is a preparation for celebrating Easter. Historically, Lent began as a period of fasting and preparation for baptism by converts and then became a time for penance by all Christians." (p. 320)

So, the days are getting longer, the ground is thawing (we hope!) and somewhere underground the bulbs of lilies, tulips and daffodils are getting themselves ready to burst open in bloom.

What's going on deep within me to get me ready to bloom at Easter?

Something happened to me after I passed the age of 60. I have moments when I think, "Hey! Is my body falling apart?" In my mental self-image I'm only about 40! Now I get together with my peers and we start the "organ recital": how's your heart, lungs, kidneys, joints and... etc.!!? I want to work just as hard and fast as always. I want to be able to fill my calendar from morning to night with worthy tasks, but something calls me to spend more time at home, more time receiving from God—time that at first glance doesn't seem productive.

The wonder of Grace is that the work happening within all of us people of faith is not our own doing. "It is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2:8) My job and my task is to find ways to say YES! to God, and welcome what God wants to do, not what I want. That can be tough... but a little easier within the context of unconditional love!

It's tempting to get too busy during Lent for all of us who are leaders in the church. But we need to be reminded that this really is a time when God is calling us to let God do the work through the Grace of Jesus Christ. And when we feel like we can't do it, God can be preparing us to BLOOM!

Prayer: Generous and generative God, come into my life this season, and do your work of creating a new thing in me. Thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Joy Schlesselman, Manteno UMC

Wednesday, March 11

What If?

Read Matthew 27:1-10

"When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."... Then he went away and hanged himself." Matthew 27:3-5

I've always had a soft spot for Judas. Judas had a significant role to play in the capture of Jesus that led to His arrest, crucifixion and death. Yet, even in the role that he played, even if God knew that Judas would play that role, even if Judas didn't have a choice in handing Jesus over to the Chief Priest, he did have a choice when it came to his suicide.

Recently, I led a study on the life and teachings of Jesus by Adam Hamilton. In that study, Hamilton proposed the question... "What if Judas had waited three days?" I was astounded by that question. I began to think of every dire situation I have ever been in or that others have ever found themselves in, and was grateful that I, along with many others, had waited three days.

Can you see the scene when the Resurrected Lord meets the one who had betrayed him with a kiss? I can. I weep, seeing the love and compassion that the Resurrected Lord had for Judas. Christ gives total understanding, unconditional love and forgiveness. Can you see the testimony that Judas would have had after his time of reconciliation with the Risen Lord? I can.

Can you imagine the book in the Bible that Judas could have authored if he had only waited three days? I can! It would have been my favorite book!

So many times in my life, when I have felt like there was no reason for continuing on, I would have loved to read how Judas waited three days. I am so very grateful to Adam Hamilton for posing that question. Now, I will pose that question to myself, and to others that God places in my path. When the situation is so dire or desperate that there seems to be no way out, what if Judas had waited three days?

I've always had a soft spot for Judas. I, for one, believe that God's love and grace welcomed Judas with open arms into His heavenly kingdom. But, oh the lives that could have been touched if Judas had only waited three days!

Prayer: Help me, loving Savior, to wait, trusting in your grace in every situation.

Lynette Barnett, Chatsworth/Forrest UMC's

Thursday, March 12

Be Still

Be still, and know that I am God. - Psalm 46:10

In the busyness of the seasons of life, faith and ministry, I have been mindful of those inviting me to stop, be still and be present.

“What deadens us most to God's presence within us, I think, is the inner dialogue that we are continuously engaged in with ourselves, the endless chatter of human thought.” - Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*

“Within each of us, there is a silence, a silence as vast as the universe. We are afraid of it. And we long for it. And when we experience that silence, we remember who we are... Silence is our deepest nature, our home, our common ground, our peace. Silence reveals, silence heals. Silence is where God dwells. We yearn to be there. We yearn to share it.” - Gunilla Norris, *Inviting Silence*

On this day of our Holy Lenten Journey, I invite you to simply sit in silence in the presence of your God. Slowly inhale the breath of God's Spirit, and exhale peace back into the world God so loves. Find again the rhythm of God's heartbeat which is our life and salvation in Christ.

Prayer: [Silence.]

Dalene Kuebler, Kankakee St. Mark and Bradley Wesley

Friday, March 13

Psalm 16 (Common English Bible)

Protect me, God, because I take refuge in you.

²I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord.

Apart from you, I have nothing good."

³Now as for the "holy ones" in the land,
the "magnificent ones" that I was so happy about;

⁴let their suffering increase because
they hurried after a different god.

I won't participate in their blood offerings;
I won't let their names cross my lips.

⁵You, LORD, are my portion, my cup;
you control my destiny.

⁶The property lines have fallen beautifully for me;
yes, I have a lovely home.

⁷I will bless the LORD who advises me;
even at night I am instructed
in the depths of my mind.

⁸I always put the LORD in front of me;
I will not stumble because he is on my right side.

⁹That's why my heart celebrates and my mood is joyous;
yes, my whole body will rest in safety

¹⁰ because you won't abandon my life to the grave;
you won't let your faithful follower see the pit.

¹¹You teach me the way of life.
In your presence is total celebration.

Beautiful things are always in your right hand.

Saturday, March 14

Help And Strength

Read Psalm 121

My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. Psalm 121:2

Have you ever felt uncertainty, frustration, anger, lost and hopelessness? I have.

Recently I have experienced these feelings. My 17 year-old son suffers from depression, addiction and self-harm. For about 4 years his father and I have been working hard to show and teach him tools to use in becoming stronger in decision-making and pressing through his depression. Unfortunately, his diagnosis and behaviors are very hard to understand, accept and to help an individual through.

I am trying to support my son, through intensive In-Patient, intensive Out-Patient therapy, and probation. But my sense of uncertainty, frustration, anger, loss and hopelessness begins to seep into my mind. These feelings are so exhausting.

Beginning with my faith, I call out, "Heavenly Father, I need your help and strength!"

It's hard for me to hear him because the feelings are so overwhelming. But when I really focus, I hear my Heavenly Father say "Look up, where does your help come from?" I reply, "It comes from You, the Maker of heaven and earth." My father then reinforces, "I will not let your foot slip." He will watch over me always and He will not harm me.

What a gracious Father we have!!! When you need help and strength, remember Psalm 121.

Prayer: Honestly, God, sometimes I feel uncertain, frustrated, angry and hopeless, even when I try to focus on You. Heavenly Father, I need your help and strength! Heavenly Father, I need your help and strength! Amen.

Jeanine Lauridsen, Certified Lay Servant, Manteno UMC

Sunday, March 15

Love Found a Way

A new year, a new decade, and yet we begin with an act of remembrance that is hundreds, if not thousands, of years old, Epiphany. On February 26th we began this season of remembrance once again with the beginning of Lent. The readings from Joel, Isaiah, the Psalms, 2nd Corinthians, and Matthew contain common themes, a calling of remembrance, an offer for redemption, and a desire by GOD, the Holy One, for humankind to accept love with honesty, genuineness, and integrity.

These stated themes are all worthwhile for us, both first time seekers and seekers who desire a deeper understanding of God, for ourselves and all humankind. To me, this commonality of wholeness is GOD's greatest gift to us. That is why, strange as it may seem, I look forward to Lent just as much as Christmas. For me, Christmas is GOD's unsolicited gift of self and Lent is GOD's unsolicited gift of forgiveness of self—ours.

Before my Mom died in 2014, she always dreaded the Lenten-Easter season. In 1964, my youngest sister was killed during this time in a fire that my brother and I started. Even at the time of her death in 2014, my Mom was still unable to reconcile Terra's death with GOD's love and GOD's willingness to let her child die. I wish I could have gotten my Mom to watch *The Shack*. I wonder, even today, if she would have come to understand GOD's willingness to let us choose our own way and yet stay with us through the choosing. Has she now come to understand that in GOD's willingness to allow choice, some of us may be hurt by choices made by others? And in the choosing/affecting GOD stands with us, hurts with us, loves with us?

Maybe understanding GOD's willingness to stand with us no matter what we do is why Lent and Christmas so completely represent GOD's love for me. But also, GOD's desire that we understand the consequences of our choices.

Are you familiar with the song *Love Found a Way*?

An angel stood with flaming sword
At Eden's darkened gate
The frightened family faced a world
Now filled with Satan's hate
These fallen children GOD so loved
Were lost in fear alone
Now love would spare no cost
To bring them home

Love found a way
And our hearts can hold
The price love chose to pay

My family stood at such a gate; but failed to see the gift of love GOD offered. It took me many years to understand the gift and to accept that love does indeed find a way through all my choices.

Prayer: GOD, help us understand that YOU stand with us, hurt with us, love us, no matter what we do. Amen.

Julie Smith, Retired

Monday, March 16

The Grandeur of God

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. Psalm 19:1-4

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God," wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins. He expressed his stewardship through the beauty of writing; others have done so through painting, making pottery, carving, weaving, spinning, or building. The desire for simplicity leads some of us to value skills nearly lost and to search out natural expressions of creativity. Our creativity will become our prayer, born of simple attention to what is around us. We enhance the world through its expression.

The 12th-century Benedictine mystic Hildegard of Bingen writes of the compassion that floods the entire universe. She teaches us that we are one with the cosmic Christ as our own compassionate loving touches all: "As human persons view creation with compassion in trust, they see the Lord. It is God which humankind is then able to recognize in every living thing."

How do we begin to know this earth and so regain that reverence for life that leads to change? How does God want me to act, choose, pray in this moment so that my way of life enhances the goodness of creation?

Prayer: Eternal One, revealed in waves and in the waiting stillness, teach me to rest, content in your love. Let my life be a poem that tells of your care, always ready to rise up on trusting wings and risk the wind. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Canham, Heart Whispers. Upper Room Books, 1999.

Tuesday, March 17

A Sticky, Goopy Mess!

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Psalm 51: 1, 2

One of my favorite activities to do with children is to treat them to a Nutty Bar. You know, those yummy peanut butter and chocolate wafers that Little Debbie is so famous for. I choose a hot day to provide this lesson. I leave the chocolate delicacies in my car so that by the time our lesson rolls around, they are very sticky. Gross to the touch, but still, soooo good. I make sure that on Nutty Bar day, there is not one paper towel or napkin available. I simply pass out the goopy snack around the table and enjoy watching the kids devour them with glee.

Then comes the inevitable turn of events. Their attention pivots from the delicious taste of the Nutty Bar in their mouth to its incredible stickiness on their fingers. They beg to be excused to wash their hands. They ask politely for a napkin. Nope. I let them sit with the mess. Soon all are complaining. Asking for help. Trying to clean it up themselves.

Finally, I take out a box of hand wipes. They all hold out their peanut buttery fingers and wait for me to help them. Then I talk about sin. How do you like the feeling of yuck on your hands? Talking over each other, they describe how awful it feels, even though the treat was so good while it lasted.

Sin is sometimes like that. When we sin, although it might feel great at the time, it comes with natural consequences that can make us feel sticky and stuck. Then, I offer to wash their sweet little hands and speak of the grace and forgiveness of Jesus that can wash away their sins. The sighs of relief around the table sound so beautiful to my ears.

Beautiful and familiar- because I too must come to Jesus with my sin stained life and ask Him to wash me clean. Again and again. Again and again still, we all come, and He forgives.

Prayer: Lord, help us to embrace the gift of Your cleansing power in our lives. And let us not hesitate to offer a hand wipe to someone who needs to know You too.

Lori Bultemeier, The Baby Fold

Wednesday, March 18

God's Amazing Grace

...but God said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

2 Corinthians 12:9 (NRSV)

Lent is a time to reflect on our mortality. This "deadline" pushes us to reflect on our lives and where we might be on the right track, and where we might be on the wrong track.

Some years ago I found myself to be really off track. I hit an identity crisis. I felt like I didn't even know who I was. I did not know what God wanted me to do next. I had spent a lifetime trying to live out other people's expectations of me. I sought counseling. I spent time at spiritual retreats. I put a priority on seeking God and God's guidance.

What I found was that I was lacking an adequate understanding of grace. I understood Grace in my head. I had preached and taught grace. Like John Wesley before his Aldersgate experience, however, I had not fully received God's Grace. I realized that I still felt like I had to earn love by being impressive and successful.

What a relief it was to begin to get a deeper sense that God loved me just because I am a beloved child of God! I was pushed to trust more in God and less in my own abilities to perform. I was pushed to listen less carefully for the praise or criticism of others around me. It is a lesson I often forget. I need to keep going deeper in my understanding of God's Amazing Grace. Lent is a good reminder to do just that.

This Lent, I invite you to reflect on these two questions with me:

1. Are there ways that I am pretending to be who I think others may want me to be?
2. How can I come to know God's Grace more fully during these 40 days?

Prayer: Amazing God, I open myself now to a deeper sense of your Grace. You love me just the way I am. You love me just the way I am. Amen.

Kent King-Nobles, Normal First UMC

Thursday, March 19

Take Nothing for The Journey

Take nothing for the journey except a walking staff; no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but do not bring an extra shirt.

Mark 6:8-9 (NIV)

Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

My parents collected antiques, mostly from family members. So when a great-aunt in Kansas wrote telling them that any furniture in her farmhouse was up for adoption my father and I jumped at the chance. I was on a college break and we drove from Illinois to Topeka in the family station wagon (remember those?) to retrieve what we could. We got several items of family interest and a three-drawer dresser that now proudly sits in our home. We strapped the dresser on to the roof of the wagon and, after a meal with my great-aunt, we headed back to Illinois. The plan was to drive through the night, but we encountered a massive storm and made the decision to check into a motel somewhere in Missouri.

We carried our "finds" into the motel room and then descended three flights of stairs to retrieve the dresser. It must have been some sight to see the two of us carrying a bedroom dresser into a motel room! As one bemused couple watched on the stairs, my father, always equipped with the right witticism, announced, "Son, this beats packing luggage." I nearly dropped my end of the dresser in laughter!

I doubt the merits of lugging around our bedroom furniture versus packing luggage. But on the road, Jesus our Lord addressed the other things disciples lugged around. They lugged around anxiety about where they would spend the night and take their next meal. They lugged around guilt and shame over decisions they had made and places they should not have gone, even after Jesus pronounced their sins "forgiven". They lugged around uncertainty about tomorrow and direction for the week ahead, even though they were traveling with the Son of God. They carried self-doubt, though they had been chosen.

We are their traveling descendants, on the road with Jesus during this season of Lent. We need to consider honestly what we are lugging around. Are we anxious about the future of "our" denomination? Are we still holding on to past hurts and hang-ups we should simply leave behind? Do we still seek to know tomorrow's itinerary, where God is calling us to go next, how we will make ends meet before we continue the journey?

Prayer: Jesus, remind us we are traveling WITH You, and we are on Your divine mission. Your promise is enough. Encourage us to continue to walk and trust that You are the One we walk beside. The rest we can leave behind. Amen.

Tom Goodell, Pontiac 1st UMC

Friday, March 20

Psalms 139 The Message (MSG)

A David Psalm

139 ¹⁻⁶ GOD, investigate my life;
get all the facts firsthand.
I'm an open book to you;
even from a distance, you know what I'm thinking.
You know when I leave and when I get back;
I'm never out of your sight.
You know everything I'm going to say
before I start the first sentence.
I look behind me and you're there,
then up ahead and you're there, too—
your reassuring presence, coming and going.
This is too much, too wonderful—
I can't take it all in!

⁷⁻¹² Is there anyplace I can go to avoid your Spirit?
to be out of your sight?
If I climb to the sky, you're there!
If I go underground, you're there!
If I flew on morning's wings
to the far western horizon,
You'd find me in a minute—
you're already there waiting!
Then I said to myself, "Oh, he even sees me in the dark!
At night I'm immersed in the light!"
It's a fact: darkness isn't dark to you;
night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to you.

¹³⁻¹⁶ Oh yes, you shaped me first inside, then out;
you formed me in my mother's womb.
I thank you, High God—you're breathtaking!
Body and soul, I am marvelously made!
I worship in adoration—what a creation!

You know me inside and out,
you know every bone in my body;
You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit,
how I was sculpted from nothing into something.
Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth;
all the stages of my life were spread out before you,
The days of my life all prepared
before I'd even lived one day.

¹⁷⁻²²Your thoughts—how rare, how beautiful!
God, I'll never comprehend them!
I couldn't even begin to count them—
any more than I could count the sand of the sea.
Oh, let me rise in the morning and live always with you!
And please, God, do away with wickedness for good!
And you murderers—out of here!—
all the men and women who belittle you, God,
infatuated with cheap god-imitations.
See how I hate those who hate you, GOD,
see how I loathe all this godless arrogance;
I hate it with pure, unadulterated hatred.
Your enemies are my enemies!

²³⁻²⁴Investigate my life, O God,
find out everything about me;
Cross-examine and test me,
get a clear picture of what I'm about;
See for yourself whether I've done anything wrong—
then guide me on the road to eternal life.

Saturday, March 21

The Journey of Transformation

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV

The journey of transformation can seem very daunting when we first embark on a deeper relationship with God. Most of us have tried to perform and accomplish things to look pleasing in God's eyes. We have tried to do this in our own strength and in our own way. The desire for change will not come through any other outlet than the work of intimate time spent between ourselves and God. There is only one Savior and no human can take over that role or make change possible. You and I are not the ultimate directors of our lives.

The flesh is a strong desire. Satan has strong desires. But God helps us die to the self-life and to the flesh. He puts examples out there for us to see, helping us to desire that change. God gives us the Bible and His people to represent and stand for what the Bible says.

Setbacks are common in the process of transformation. They are just part of the process. Dying to the self and dying to the flesh are the main ingredients to maintaining God's peace. In a recipe, all ingredients must be used to create the final product. The conflicts and pulling of the flesh, and of the world, must be overcome before a true peace can be maintained.

God is real and He wants to restore lives. Once we surrender all our fears about life, all our preconceived notions, all the hatred, and give it all to Him, amazing things can happen. It is not an instant 'magic' process though. It does take time. Through the Holy Spirit we are able to do more than we could on our own merits.

Prayer: Beloved Savior, help me to walk into your loving arms as I seek to let you change, transform and restore my life. Amen.

Dawn Shay, Eastview Christian Church

Sunday, March 22

Never Give Up

"The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down."
Psalm 145:14 (NRSV)

Sometimes, when things become too hard, it's easy to give up. When we've tried our best over and over and failed over and over, it just makes sense to quit. Even as Christians, repeated failure and rejection can cause us to throw up our hands and just quit trying. But do you know who never gives up on us? God.

There have been others who haven't given up as well.

John Chaney had a rough start in life. Even before he was born in 1876, his father rejected him and wanted his mother to have an abortion. But before her son was born, John's mother left Chaney and remarried a disabled Civil War veteran named John. They didn't have a lot of money so young John had to go to work. At age 13 he worked 18 hours a day in a canning factory and so didn't have a chance to attend much school. Thanks to a kind local librarian, John fell in love with books and also writing. He loved to write stories.

When he finally did get to go to school, young John tried to publish some of his writings. He was rejected, every time. But he never gave up. To make ends meet at age 17, he set sail on a ship to hunt seals. He kept writing and he continued to receive rejection letters from publishers. For a while he was even a hobo during the economic depression of 1893. But he still kept writing even though he still kept being rejected. In fact, he collected 664 rejection letters before the age of 21. You might think that would be enough failure for him, or anyone, to give up. But not John.

In 1897 he left home and joined the California Gold Rush hoping to make his fortune. He didn't. But he gained some more experiences to write about. When he returned penniless from the Klondike, he finally caught a break. The *Cosmopolitan Magazine* agreed to publish, in serial form, one of his Klondike stories, a story about a dog. That book, and not the gold fields made his fortune. In fact, his book, *The Call of the Wild*, is still read today. All because the author, John Chaney, never gave up. Today he is known by his nick name and his step-dad's last name: Jack London.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, life is full of challenges and failures. Strengthen my trust in You. Help me during my trials and failures to know that you are always with me and will never reject me, though the world may. Your steadfast love is never failing. Amen.

Miles Q. Turner, Praise Band and Tech Team Member, Manteno UMC

Monday, March 23

Give Me a Break!

At evening, morning, and midday I complain and moan so that God will hear my voice. He saves me, unharmed, from my struggle, though there are many who are out to get me. Psalm 55:17, 18 Common English Bible (CEB)

A Journal Entry, March 29, 1996

I come to my journal at this time with a sense of hard work lying before me in order to recover awareness and a sense of intimacy with God. Grace reminds me to let go. Spring birds caught my attention as I opened the door for Bonnie and now they continue their persistent sound—new songs. So here I am at the end of a long, over-busy time, sitting not with blame but with gratitude for today. A dream image comes to mind: As I get into my car the emergency brake comes away in my hand and I mutter, “Give me a break!” I love dream humor, which sometimes conveys truth in a more palatable way than rational thought. God is inviting me to let go of the busy activities that seem so essential and simply to rest in this time.

Prayer: Loving Companion, hold me in your compassionate silence. Let me see clearly the barriers I have erected to keep you at a distance, so that my walk with you today may deepen my desire to listen and to love you always. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Canham, Heart Whispers. Upper Room Books, 1999.

Tuesday, March 24

Stand, Look and Ask

“Thus says the Lord, stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is and walk in it and you shall find rest for your soul.” Jeremiah 6:16

Reading through the book of Jeremiah this verse stood out for me with very powerful words to begin the New Year: Stand, see, ask, walk the balance between the old and the new, find rest for your soul.

Standing at a crossroad or intersection becomes a cautionary moment to ‘stop’, ‘be still’, look for the joggers, oncoming traffic, dog walkers. It is a moment of decision making, to see if I am going in the right direction. Lent is the moment of standing in the realization of God’s grace and my calling to live the life of faith in Jesus.

The challenge is that standing at this junction, Jeremiah says I am to see (observe) and ask (mentioned twice) about the old paths (traditions of our beliefs). This well-travelled strip (old traditions) might have gotten covered with overgrown vegetation. People have quit walking on it but within there is hidden another strip. It is time to find the good way. There is no danger in inquiring about the old pathways but at the same time God’s will for Israel and Judean people was to find the good way. It is the same for us.

Jesus shared with us that He is the Way. In Him the old and the new intersect. In my moment of pause during Lent, as I stand, see and ask, may I find the good way and walk on it so I may find rest for my soul.

Prayer- God of travelling mercies, watch over me as I journey through the wilderness of life under the shadow of your cloud of grace. Light my path with your presence. Lead me to walk the good way. Amen.

Ivy Silas, Retired, serving McDowell UMC

Wednesday, March 25

We Can Celebrate It, Too!

Read: Luke 1:26-38

Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38 (NKJV)

Only Nine More Months Until Christmas!! (What is this doing in a Lenten Devotional booklet?) We celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25th each year. Our Catholic and Eastern Orthodox friends mark this day as the Feast of the Annunciation. On this day (nine months before his birth) we remember the Angel Gabriel visiting Mary and giving her the good news, that God had chosen her to be the mother of Jesus. I see this as a day to celebrate the discipleship of Mary.

It is important because discipleship does not have a season. There are many ideas about Mary, the mother of Jesus. I think of her most as the first disciple. How does her example help me as a follower of Jesus?

I see her as a person of faith. If I had an angelic visitation would I believe it? Would I believe the message the angel had for me? Could I have handled the idea that God had chosen me? Me? Out of all the people on the whole planet, God would choose me? Mary has a rock-solid faith.

Mary cares more about what God wants than what she wants. Her Son said it best in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will, but thine be done." Frequently, we are challenged to set goals. What do **you** want to do in 1 year, 5 years and 10 years from now? There is a certain centering peace in answering, "God's will."

I appreciate that Mary asked a question. Curiosity is key to growing in our faith. Please notice she did not ask why? The question "why" is always a search for meaning. Why is usually answered with, "Because" or "I don't know." Mary asked, "How?" She wanted to know how God was going to work in this very extraordinary circumstance.

With her curiosity satisfied, her assurance filled, she yields herself to God. May Mary, the Mother of Jesus, model discipleship to all of us.

Thought for the Day: Will one day, someone name my name as a model of discipleship?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your mother continues to inspire us as disciples. May we be as faithful, God-centered and curious. Help us to grow in our discipleship each day that you give us.

Carl Johnston, Atlanta, Ebenezer, Hopedale UMCs

Thursday, March 26

Job's Friends

Job prayed for his friends. Job 42:10

I have mistreated friends over the years. I've been too busy to respond when they reached out to me. Embarrassed by my failure, I've made the situation worse by postponing any attempt to reconcile. Lamenting my inaction by inaction, I now know it has been my loss!

Job had friends who actually came to be with him, appreciated his trials, and gave him advice. Their advice was tainted, but at least they tried. One of my friends actually drove hundreds of miles to attend my father's funeral, to be there for me. And to my shame I didn't take time to acknowledge his sacrifice adequately.

In the Epilogue of Job, God speaks to Job's friends and gives them an opportunity to be forgiven and restored. God says, "My servant Job will pray for you (vs. 8) and I will accept his prayer for you."

This is inspiring and provoking me to action in my Lenten journey. I am seeking forgiveness and restoration. First, I'm asking God's forgiveness. Second, I am praying for my friends with no strings attached, asking God to bless them. Finally, I am reaching out to them and asking for their forgiveness.

Job had been hurt by his friends. God provided them an opportunity for reconciliation. Lent is a time to reflect on our sinfulness and to seek restoration. Hear our prayers, O Lord!

Prayer: Lord, I pray for the gift of friends. Help me to take the time to seek and offer forgiveness and reconciliation. Amen.

Ken Sloan-Couch, Retired, serving Long Point UMC

Friday, March 27

Psalm 57

¹Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me, for in you I take refuge.
I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.

²I cry out to God Most High, to God, who vindicates me.

³He sends from heaven and saves me, rebuking those who hotly pursue me—God sends forth his love and his faithfulness.

⁴I am in the midst of lions; I am forced to dwell among ravenous beasts—
men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords.

⁵Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.

⁶They spread a net for my feet—I was bowed down in distress.

They dug a pit in my path—but they have fallen into it themselves.

⁷My heart, O God, is steadfast, my heart is steadfast;

I will sing and make music.

⁸Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn.

⁹I will praise you, Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the

peoples. ¹⁰For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness

reaches to the skies. ¹¹Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory

be over all the earth

Saturday, March 28

40 Days And Nights

Read: Exodus 34:28-32

Now I had stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights, as I did the first time, and the LORD listened to me at this time also.

Deuteronomy 10:10a (NIV)

The number 40 is mentioned 146 times in the Bible. How many of these can you name? Probably the first that comes to mind is the flood in the seventh chapter of Genesis, when it rained for 40 days and nights, while Noah and his family were safe inside the ark. Moses' life was filled with forties! In the Book of Exodus (which has 40 chapters) we read how he lived 40 years in Egypt, then 40 years in the desert before God sent him back to Egypt to free his people, the Israelites. He then led them through the wilderness for 40 years. In addition, he spent 40 days and nights on top of Mount Sinai (twice), and sent spies into the promised land for 40 days.

Jesus spent 40 days and nights fasting before he began his ministry. After his resurrection, he remained on earth for 40 days. And 40 years later, just as Jesus predicted, the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem.

For us, the 40 days and nights of Lent are a period of preparation, in which we follow Christ's example in the desert through fasting, prayer, meditation, and spiritual 'Spring cleaning'. So let us look to both the cross and the empty tomb to renew our spirits - and our ministry.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – 40 days of self-denial doesn't seem so long when compared with the eternity of heavenly rewards it will reap.

PRAYER FOCUS: Spiritual cleansing leading to more effective ministry

Prayer: Dear Lord, cleanse my life and my spirit of all that would hinder my prayers and keep me from hearing your voice. Amen.

Karen Fabian, Braceville and Mazon UMC's and Evenglow Lodge

Sunday, March 29

The Real Power

1 Corinthians 1:17: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."

God has a sense of humor! I often think so, when something happens that stops me from thinking too highly of myself! And so it happened today. I opened my mouth to answer the phone early this morning—and nothing came out—not even a squeak! A preacher with no words to speak—is it my worst nightmare, or my congregation's brightest hope?

Just yesterday I preached with full voice—and my chosen Scripture was Paul's own confession that he was not sent to preach with wisdom or eloquence. No matter how much he wanted to spread the Gospel, it was more important not to empty the cross of its power.

So today I will speak less, or not at all, and listen more. I will remember that God can work in mysterious ways when I let my own importance get out of the way.

What did Christ send you to do? If not to baptize or preach, then what? Whatever it is we are each called to do, the purpose is not to look good, to appear righteous, or to be noticed for our service to God. The purpose is to point the way to the cross of Christ, which is where the real power is!

Paul goes on to say: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor. 1:18) I feel so honored when, on a rare occasion, someone says, "Your sermon today was powerful." Perhaps I should be even more honored when there is no power in my words, but when any moment in worship or service points to the cross. That's more powerful than any words!

Prayer: God, when we feel powerless, remind us that your cross is where the real power is. Thank you, God, for Jesus, whose life and death on the cross are still transforming our lives today! Amen.

Joy Schlesselman, Manteno

Monday, March 30

No Sharp Edges!

A Journal Entry, August 9, 1996

God has no sharp edges! This thought came to me as I sat before my icon of Mary embracing a small but adult looking Christ, an image of loving embrace. My body was there but I found my mind wandering and my hands fidgety, so began harshly to judge my ability to be present. God seemed to invite me to accept the restlessness and come back into conscious prayer each time I became aware of "going away."

I am looking forward to a time of retreat next week but this can keep me from being present now and accepting that this day promises to be a busy one. Today I want to find the divine in the midst of the mundane, and that will take a change of attitude. God's love can be tough; God's call can lead me into some painful places, but there are no sharp edges!

Prayer: Holy One, hold me. Lead me into the fullness of your grace. Let me walk with you today, and if I stray along byways of my own choosing, turn me around and bring me home. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Canham, *Heart Whispers*, The Upper Room Books, 1999.

Tuesday, March 31

Quiet Time

As Christians, we have all heard about a daily “quiet time” or “prayer time”. But what really is “quiet time”? It sure can be a funny thing sometimes. Does it feel like a school assignment? Should it be scheduled in or should it just come automatic? What happens if we actually don’t want to do it and then feel guilty about it? What if we feel weariness about having to do it? How do we come before God authentically in times like these?

Jesus spent time with God in gardens, in temples, with his friends, and with strangers. He prayed alone; he prayed in groups; he probably prayed under His breath at times. He didn’t follow a plan, and He doesn’t prescribe a certain training plan for prayer.

Quiet time is not an obligation, but a meaningful time of connection. There is no right or wrong way to do it. We all change and go through many seasons in our relationship with God. What worked for us when we first became a Christian may not work for us now. We may need to find a new way to look towards Him.

Somewhere along the way, I was convinced that there was a recipe for a “successful” Bible study or quiet time—but that idea isn’t scripturally based. Sometimes it can be difficult to continue being enthusiastic about a faith that we may have had since childhood. When quiet time starts to become stagnant, we can be honest with God and say, “God, I WANT to pray, but I’m finding it hard to stay focused.” Confessing our difficulty in prayer is just as much a quiet time prayer as is a joyful, reverent thanksgiving for the blessings that He has given over our lives.

Currently, quiet time for me is a time to focus on recognizing and experiencing God’s presence in my life and communicating with Him through intentional prayer. Long prayers and short prayers can be intentional. I wait to hear from God and this wait can change every day, depending on my heart’s desire. This may not be my “forever approach,” but for now, it makes quiet time refreshing and new every day. Faith development through prayer should never feel like an obligation, but rather an authentic action that creates a passion inside of us.

Prayer: Lord, I choose to be open and submitted to You today. I ask You to bring myself out of hiding so that I can praise Your name with the greatness

that You deserve. I trust You to be my protector and my shield. May my time with You be intentional and authentic as I give You the desires of my heart.

Dawn Shay, Eastview Christian Church

Wednesday, April 1

Black Raspberries

Read John 15:1-2

A few years ago (to us old guys it weren't so long) our family moved to Aledo to pastor that great church. At the end of the driveway, where a garage once stood, were a basketball hoop and one lonely Black Raspberry bush. Now if you have not had any Black Raspberries you have not lived life to its fullest! My wife, the daughter of a gardener extraordinaire, understood what had to be done to get to that wonderful fruit.

Raspberries are tricky, they have thorns and long entwining stems. The fruit starts out red and looks good enough to eat, but you have to wait until it turns dark black to harvest the sweetness. And after the harvest, just as the weather is getting cooler, you have to prune your bush or there will be a smaller harvest each coming year.

How about you? Have you been pruned? It would seem like cutting on the bush would hurt it but it grows better when you do. Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."

If you feel like you are being pruned, don't despair, it is so you can bear sweeter fruit of the Spirit.

Brent K. Phillips, Retired

Thursday, April 2

A Community of Believers

Acts 13:2 "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'."

A few years ago, on a Footsteps of Paul Trip with Educational Opportunities, amongst the many joys of the trip was the delightful and competent staff on the cruise ship. I remember one particular day when the captain held a Q & A session. He was asked all sorts of questions. "When you are here, who's driving the ship?" He assured us that there were always 3 captains on the bridge, working 4-hour shifts.

Then he was asked, "Can you comment on the captain of the ship that recently wrecked off the coast of Italy?" The Captain was very careful and respectful in his answer, first of all acknowledging that we are all human and mistakes get made.

And then he said, "This is why we have a **team** of captains. For instance, I present to them my plans for navigating some waters or coming into a certain port. And then they ask me questions. They may remind me that this was a different plan than I had told them before. It used to be where there was one captain and no one questioned him. But I want my captains to ask questions, to offer their thoughts."

That's the kind of captain that instills confidence and does his job with excellence. None of us have all the wisdom and insight that we need for any job and especially for living out our faith.

When Paul set out on his first missionary journey, he **and** Barnabas went together. On his 2nd missionary journey, this time it was Paul **and** Silas **and** Timothy (Acts 15:40 & Acts 16:3). Leading and serving together meant there would be support, wisdom, and perspective. That's what the church community continues to offer today. I am thankful to be a part of a **community** of believers.

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for the companions on our journey. We pray for those who are going through life without the support of a loving community. May we always keep our hearts and doors open wide to welcome others into our communities of faith. Amen.

Kathy King-Nobles, Normal 1st UMC

Friday, April 3

Lamentations 3:1-6; 19-26 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹I am one who has seen affliction
under the rod of God's wrath;

²he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;

³against me alone he turns his hand,
again and again, all day long.

⁴He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
and broken my bones;

⁵he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;

⁶he has made me sit in darkness
like the dead of long ago.

¹⁹The thought of my affliction and my homelessness
is wormwood and gall!

²⁰My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.

²¹But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:

²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;

²³they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

²⁴"The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

²⁵The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.

²⁶It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.

Saturday, April 4

Behold the Savior of Mankind

Behold the Savior of mankind nailed to the shameful tree;
How vast the love that him inclined to bleed and die for thee!
Hark how he groans! While nature shakes, and earth's strong pillars bend!
The temple's veil in sunder breaks, the solid marbles rend.
'Tis done! The precious ransom's paid! "Receive my soul!" he cries;
See where he bows his sacred head! He bows his head and dies!
But soon he'll break death's envious chain and in full glory shine.
O Lamb of God, was ever pain, was ever love like thine?

Written by Samuel Wesley (1662-1735), this is one of the few relics of his papers found after the fire which destroyed the Epworth rectory during the night of February 9, 1709, when his son, young John Wesley, was rescued as a "brand plucked out of the burning."

[*The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 293. ©1989]

Palm Sunday, April 5

³⁷When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

³⁸“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”^[a]

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

⁴⁰“I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

Luke 19:37-40 (NIV)

Hosanna, Loud Hosanna

Hosanna, loud hosanna, the little children sang;
Through pillared court and temple the lovely anthem rang.
To Jesus, who had blessed them close folded to his breast,
The children sang their praises, the simplest and the best.

From Olivet they followed mid an exultant crowd,
The victor palm branch waving, and chanting clear and loud.
The Lord of earth and heaven rode on in lowly state,
Nor scorned that little children should on his bidding wait.

“Hosanna in the highest!” that ancient song we sing,
For Christ is our Redeemer, the Lord of heaven our King.
O may we ever praise him with heart and life and voice.
And in his blissful presence, eternally rejoice!

[Words by Jeanette Threlfall, 1873; German tune adapted by W.H. Monk, 1868. The United Methodist Hymnal, © 1989, # 278]

Monday, April 6

The Bitter Cup

Journal Entry, 1991

"I haven't got time for the pain," they say,
a caplet or shrink
will settle everything—
insomnia, neurosis, constipation—
cherry flavored
oblivion
and a blast of T.V.
first-aiding the forgetting.

Cats know better.
Attentive to the pain
they wait wide-eyed
and watch,
curled and still
they let the hurting be
and, wiser than humans,
yield themselves to now.

Pain asks for time,
requests our presence
and teaches us the measure of our joy.
We drink the bitter cup
and angels bear us through the dark night of our unknowing
into the Easter moment.

Prayer: Loving God, you spoke to your ancient people saying, "In returning and rest you will be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength." Grant that we too may find grace to cease from busy-ness and be still in your presence. Enable us to defeat the enemies of fear, envy, anxiety, and impatience that drive us to exhaustion, and give to us that peace which the world can never give. We pray in the name of Jesus, Prince of Peace. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Canham, *Heart Whispers*, The Upper Room Books, 1999.

Tuesday, April 7

Prayer of Ignatius of Loyola

Teach us, good Lord,

To serve you as you deserve;

To give and not to count the cost;

To fight and not to heed the wounds;

To toil and not to seek for rest;

To labor and not to ask for any reward, except that of knowing that we
do your will;

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The United Methodist Hymnal, ©1989, #570

Wednesday, April 8

Fear Not

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called *you* by your name; You *are* Mine. When you pass through the waters, I *will be* with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you. For I *am* the Lord your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior." Isaiah 43:1-3 (NKJV)

Back in the 80's and early 90's, my mom, sister Debbie and I would go around to churches and sing for fund raisers and worship services. One of the songs we always would seem to fall back on was called "Fear Not". I recently found three versions of it on YouTube – my favorite was done by Paco556 under the category of Old School Worship Songs (I could not believe it was called 'Old School'). I cannot remember who originally wrote the music but I do remember the story behind it. The composer was in a plane that had crashed in the water and was on fire. The above referenced verse kept going through his mind while fighting for life, and by the grace of God he was saved and lived. He wrote the song as a thanksgiving to God and to remind others of God's Grace and mercy.

Our children, nephews and nieces would love to sing this song at family gatherings, in the car – just whenever they felt like it. It was a great song because the kids were learning a primary Bible verse that would be a basis for life and they got to shout "No Way" and clap during the song. For me, it was one of my life verses that I would fall back on. It was even used as a verse at my niece Valynda's funeral 2 years ago.

The family was having a swim party and my sister Kris was throwing quarters into the pool for the children to dive for and keep. My daughter LaVonne, being the best swimmer and deepest diver at age 5 1/2, had collected her quarters and stuck them in her mouth to carry to the surface. You may have guessed it; she took a deep breath when she surfaced and swallowed them. Dinner was ready and we were gathering the troops, but my daughter did not come to the table – I found her by the pool crying and barely able to talk. In the process of taking her to emergency quick care and then transferring her to the hospital for surgical removal, we were told that the quarter (we later found out it was two quarters) was lodged between her esophagus and her breathing tube. According to the emergency room doctor, they could go either way and choke her or cut off her breathing.

Was I afraid? Yes. Did I panic? Yes. Did I pray up a storm? Yes. But the thing that helped me the most was my sweet daughter's raspy voice: "Mommy, sing the 'Fear Not' song," before they wheeled her into surgery. It gave new meaning to the old saying "Out of the mouths of babes." The doctor, nurses, attendants, or whoever was there at the moment, stopped everything, even joining hands, and listened. The doctor even said, "Amen," when I was done. As I was singing that praise song to my daughter, I grew stronger and felt the love of God surround me. I knew everything was in God's hands and that she would be safe.

In this season of Lent, as we approach the violence and agony of Good Friday, or even in the middle of our own personal agonies, we need to remember that God has called us by name, he has redeemed us – we are his children. God's promise is to be with us through the water and the flame - we will not be hurt – we are loved.

We have the joy of Easter!

YouTube link to the 'Fear Not' song:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvsyBJ_5axo

Valerie Mezger Wengstrom, Trinity, Bradley Evangelical, Aroma Park UMC's

Maundy Thursday, April 9

Remember

1 Corinthians 11:24, 25: "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me... This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Read: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

1st Corinthians gives us an understanding of where Jesus is with the disciples before he is crucified. He told the disciples during the Lord's supper to take and eat this bread and do it as often as you can in remembrance of me. Often times, going to church when communion was offered, I would think to myself, "Yes, I finally get to eat something!" I was not sure the real meaning behind the Lord's supper until I got older.

After I came to know Jesus Christ as my savior, and through reading and studying the Bible, I came to an understanding that was much clearer. Now, as a pastor, I take this to heart. Each time I partake of the Lord's supper I remember what Jesus did for us on the cross. He forgave me of all my sins and he loved me just the way I am.

We as Christians sometimes forget what the purpose of taking communion really is: we are remembering Jesus' sacrifice for us through the cross. This is where our faith lies.

So, remember. Every time we partake of the Lord's supper, let us ponder its true meaning. What Jesus told the disciples applies to us, here and now, when he said, "Take eat, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." After the supper he took the cup, gave thanks and gave it to his disciples and said, "Drink from this all of you. This is my blood, poured out for you, and for many, for the forgiveness of sins."

Prayer: Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [Prayer from *The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 8. © 1989.]

Bobby Davis, Three-Rivers Parish: Pleasant Grove, Ellsworth, Colfax UMC's

Good Friday, April 10

What Would I Have Done?

Matthew 27:32 "As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross."

I have had the privilege of singing "Watch the Lamb" for over 30 years. I have also sung it on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday or Good Friday. I have had someone sign while I was singing. As I try very hard to get into character, sometimes my emotions overcome me. Here is the man Simon of Cyrene who gets picked out of the crowd to carry the cross. The song depicts him as a father with his children, hanging out in Jerusalem when all of the craziness takes place with Jesus. We don't know if the children watched their daddy carry the cross of Christ or if they were enamored with the man they called Jesus, who looked horrid from the beatings.

What if that was my dad carrying the cross and I was a child? What if it was my husband or me? What would it have felt like at that moment? Would I have been scared to have been there or would it have been an honor to carry the cross of Christ? Would I have wished I had picked a different day to come to town? How could I have watched them beat the Messiah?

To this day I cannot help but think I am so fortunate to be a messenger of the One who died for ME and YOU! When I sing "Watch the Lamb", I often find my heart in my throat, because I realize the enormity of all that happened the week we call Holy Week.

May we never get too big or think we are more important than we are in life! If we do, may we find the cross of Christ, realizing his humility. May we remember our calling to serve the One who came that we might have life!

Prayer: Lord, please remind us to never be so big and important for you that we forget why we are called to serve in your name! Draw us closer to the One who died on the cross for our sins! Amen

Krista Price, El Paso UMC

Saturday, April 11

The Seven Last Words

1. Luke 23:34 Father, forgive them.
2. Luke 23:43 Today you will be with me in paradise.
3. John 19:26-27 Woman, here is your son.
4. Mark 15:34 (Matthew 27:46) My God, why have you forsaken me?
5. John 19:28 I am thirsty.
6. John 19:30a It is finished.
7. Luke 23:46 Into your hands I commend my spirit.

[from *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, p. 365. ©1992]

Psalm 22:1-11

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?

² My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.

³ Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises.

⁴ In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.

⁵ To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not
put to shame.

⁶ But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

⁷ All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

⁸ "He trusts in the LORD," they say,
"let the LORD rescue him.

Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him."

⁹ Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.

¹⁰ From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God.

¹¹ Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

EASTER SUNDAY, April 12

"The Strife is O'er, the Battle Done"

o *Refrain:* Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

1. The strife is o'er, the battle done;
The victory of life is won;
The song of triumph has begun:
Alleluia!

2. The powers of death have done their worst,
But Christ their legions hath dispersed;
Let shouts of holy joy outburst:
Alleluia!

3. The three sad days are quickly sped;
He rises glorious from the dead;
All glory to our risen Head!
Alleluia!

4. Lord, by the stripes which wounded thee,
from death's dread sting thy servants free,
That we may live, and sing to thee:
Alleluia!

Words: Anon. Latin, 1695, trans.by: Francis Pott, 1861.

Music: Giovanni P. da Palestrina, 1591, arr. By W. H. Monk, 1861.

The United Methodist Hymnal, ©1989, #306

End Notes:

All Scriptures are from the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

Thanks to all our writers and contributors!! In the process of editing, I made a few grammatical changes and shortened some of the devotions, but I hope and pray that I stayed true to what each writer was trying to say. Please forgive me if I didn't!

It's been a JOY to serve as your editor! May this add to the depth and meaning of our Lenten Journeys!

Blessings, Joy Schlesselman